

**THERE WILL BE MORE JOY IN HEAVEN OVER ONE SINNER WHO REPENTS–
Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM**

Luke 15,1-32

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbours, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them.³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

While the scribes and Pharisees had the ambition to bring the people to God, and therefore bringing them with the observance of rules and religious precepts, Jesus chooses a different path. He does

not want to take men towards God, because he knows that if one wants to take men towards God, inevitably someone remains behind and someone remains excluded, so Jesus brings God towards men and God towards men is only achieved by : communication of his mercy and compassion. But these scribes and Pharisees, these very pious and devout people, instead of being content and collaborating with Jesus in his work , are against him. Let's read the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15, 1 - 32

"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him." therefore the outcasts of society, those excluded from religion and the marginalized, who feel in the message of Jesus the response to the desire for fullness of life that each person has within.

As much as the person can live in a wrong direction of his existence, no matter how immersed in sin, there is always in him a desire for the fullness of life, a desire for happiness, which he has unfortunately often chosen incorrectly and has sunk into despair and pain, but this voice was always there. And therefore in Jesus there is the answer to his desire.

"...to hear him." While Jesus is heard by publicans and sinners, the Pharisees, that is, the pious ones, and the scribes, the official theologians, *"...grumbled, saying,..."* It is interesting how in the Gospels the religious authorities, the spiritual masters, the scribes and the Pharisees, avoid pronouncing the name of Jesus. Jesus means "the Lord saves", and they do not need this salvation from the Lord and they turn to him always with a fairly crude and derogatory term, "this, this one". And now the scandal *"This man receives sinners and eats with them."* Not only does Jesus welcome them, he even eats with them. Eating means sharing one's life. If you eat with a person you are infected, inevitably his impurity is transmitted to everyone else. They have not understood that with Jesus the sinners, the unbelievers, the impure, they must not purify themselves to be worthy to eat with him, but it is to eat with him what purifies them. But religious people do not understand this.

"So he told them this parable" This parable, we will now see is not addressed to the disciples of Jesus, but to scribes and Pharisees, that is to his enemies. It is a parable that is composed of three parts, in the first two it speaks of the joy of God, and in the third, known as that of the prodigal son, the reasons for this joy.

Jesus says, and takes it for granted: *"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?"* Jesus takes for granted what scribes and Pharisees consider madness. No sane person leaves ninety-nine sheep in the desert at the mercy of animals and thieves, to go in search of one who has been lost without having the certainty of finding it. Well the logic of the world, which is the logic of convenience, is not the logic of Jesus.

Jesus' logic is the one that is good for mankind. And therefore Jesus presents himself as this shepherd who abandons the ninety-nine to go in search of the only one who was lost *"And when he has found it,..."* the scribes and Pharisees would imagine that the protagonist would tie a rope to its neck and, with kicks, lead it into the fold, lock it in and never let out again, scolding it and punishing it. Instead, when he finds it *"...he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing."*

This lost sheep - getting lost in Luke's gospel is an image of sin – it is treated better than the other ninety-nine. It is weak and the shepherd communicates strength to it. Then it comes to have a relationship with the shepherd that none of the other ninety-nine sheep will have. In fact, the shepherd puts it on his shoulders and shows it his joy.

"And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbours, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, ...'" But, while the shepherd of the parable invites others to rejoice, we see that here instead scribes and Pharisees grumble. *"....for I have found my sheep that was lost.'*

This sheep will no longer be a sheep among others, but a sheep that has a special relationship with its shepherd. And Jesus continues: *"..I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents..."* This is why Jesus communicates life to sinners, because he knows that the strength

of his word, the communication of his life, if accepted, can leave the world of sin and transgression and find his life with the project that God has always had for his creatures.

“...than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

Then there is the second parable that shows the delicacy of Jesus. Whenever he has to give examples, he usually gives an example using the male, but now a female. Jesus does not forget the world of women, and if he first spoke of a man, the shepherd, here now the woman enters the scene. A woman who has ten coins and loses one. *“..what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And also in this case the reaction is one of joy “And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’”* And again the words of Jesus *“ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”* God rejoices, sinners are converted, the shepherd and his neighbours rejoice, the woman and her friends rejoice. Who grumbles? The scribes and the Pharisees.

Here then is the third, which is addressed to the scribes and Pharisees, the eldest son is presented, the one who is represented as the religious person who has always served his father, like a servant his lord, has always obeyed his commands, but precisely for this reason service and command did not make him understand the heart of the Father. Then, while the Father rejoices for the return of the son who *“was dead, and is alive;”* the older brother, rather than rejoice, he who judges everything with the religious parameters of morality, becomes indignant, becomes angry and it is he who does not want to enter the house.